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# Redefining the role of Al-Ṭahṭāwī during his Trip to France: ’Imām or Student

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## Abstract

Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801–1873) is a public figure known in all the aspects of life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Middle East. In a previous study about the history of translation in the Arab World during the 19<sup>th</sup> century I was able to prove that al-Ṭahṭāwī started and led a school of translation, not of languages. This time I try to challenge a very basic thing that is commonly known about al-Ṭahṭāwī. It is said that he travelled to France in the first Egyptian mission to study abroad as *’Imām* and preacher.

I will count on re-reading his book about the trip and other sources which were published during his life and which came earlier than the famous sources.

**Keywords:** al-Ṭahṭāwī, Translation History, Arabic Renaissance

## 1. Background

It is believed that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point that took Egypt to the modern age. It was a huge move from weakness, backwardness and recession towards enlightenment and rebirth of a strong active modern culture. This, as believed, came to happen as a result of direct contact with the European side. Such contact was achieved through French invasion in the beginning that brought science and technology of Europe to the middle east in general and Egypt in particular. Later, it found a more peaceful way with education and study abroad programs. The former shocked the people of the middle east and forced their eyes and minds open to see the benefits of Modern science. The latter helped the same people to accept what they had seen without hatred. It changed the image of the French from the enemy position to the guide one.

Al-Ṭahṭāwī played a key role in this as he travelled to France and came back full of ideas and energy to change things and to pass what he had known and adopted to his fellow citizens. He was not the only one to receive modern education or to travel abroad, but he was the most qualified one with his background that would help him form the new ideas in a way acceptable to the traditional force of his country and culture. His Azhari background was also a shield to protect him from the accusations of being a source of danger to Islam.

This role was played using al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as a mediator between the two cultures. It was again played by the case of Egypt itself as a mediator that helped the Othman traditional army accept the modern European way of army formation and training.

Others believe that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the time when the natural modernity of the middle east was interrupted during its formation process to give the way to an imported culture, ready and willing to impose hegemony on the Arab world. The natural modernity was growing in al-'Azhar<sup>1)</sup> when Azhari scholars were able to stand between Egyptians and Mamluks and to impose an agreement between the two sides forcing the latter group to respect the former one and protect it from the repeated oppression and aggression of the Mamluks. At that point of the 1790s, al-'Azhar was leading and imposing new standards on the Egyptian life that would have reshaped the relation between authority and people.

Few years later al-'Azhar was defeated and humiliated and then manipulated by the French. But soon after that recovered and supported the wishes of the Egyptians by helping Muḥammad 'Alī to become the ruler of Egypt. The reward came in the form of destruction. Muḥammad 'Alī destroyed the unity of the Azharis and exiled some of them. So al-'Azhar was in one of its weak times when the French orientalist decided to give it the final knock-out by manipulating its young generations again and push them to adopt the new culture that is coming from Europe. So it was a case of acculturation.

Whether it was enlightenment or acculturation, Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī remains the key figure that led the change while being influenced by what he had seen and learned in France and through France. His remarkable achievement in writing cannot be missed. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī started a new way in composing books that can be read and understood without extra extended explanations, annotations or side notes. He kept using rhymed titles. Yet, his style inside the books he wrote or translated was almost free of all traditional decorations.

## 2. Granted facts

al-Ṭaḥṭāwī is one of the few names that can be mentioned in many contexts: his name has always been connected to education, enlightenment, renaissance, journalism, historiography, Arabic grammar, medicine, engineering, military, politics and even exile, and above all comes translation.

Many researchers dealt with al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's biography and achievements. They always mentioned

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1) al-'Azhar is the biggest mosque in Egypt and a very old one. It was built in 969 and was opened for the public in 972. It used to play the role of a mosque and a university. al-'Azhar used to accommodate Muslims from all over the world and to hire many of them in different positions. The graduate from al-'Azhar is usually called 'Azhari.

his name with great respect and appreciation of his role in modernizing Egypt. One exception was Maḥmūd Shākir who said that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was a naive young man and was manipulated by Jomard and other orientalist during his stay in France between 1826–1831.<sup>2)</sup>

When the name al-Ṭaḥṭāwī is mentioned there is a list of statements that are narrated time after another about him and they form the glorious and legendary image of him. This list includes the following points which people think are all facts that cannot be wrong by any way.

- A) al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was born in Ṭaḥṭā, a city in southern Egypt, in 1801.
- B) al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's family transcending from the family of Prophet Muhammad the messenger of Islam.
- C) He moved with his family from one place to another during his childhood.
- D) al-Ṭaḥṭāwī received traditional education through his family until the age of 16 when he moved to study in al-'Azhar – the great mosque in Cairo which served as one of the few great traditional universities for Muslims for many centuries.
- E) Some sources stated that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī spent about 8 years as a student while others claimed that he graduated in 1821 and spent the next 2 years teaching in al-'Azhar.
- F) With the help of his mentor Ḥasan al-'Aṭṭār, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was able to get a job as a preacher in some army units between 1824-1825. Many scholars also claimed that al-'Aṭṭār was the one who nominated al-Ṭaḥṭāwī to join the mission of Egyptian students to France.
- G) In 1826, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was chosen to join the first big group of students to study abroad in France as an 'Imām which means as a liturgical leader for the prayers and as preacher and consultant in religious affairs for the students. Some sources claimed that he was one of three people assigned for this job. This statement is the one that will be challenging in this paper.
- H) According to most of the writings, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was not supposed to study anything. They claim that even though, he did great effort to study the language and spent much time in that. He, they added, hired a private tutor from his own money to teach him.
- I) After his return from France in 1831, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī served as a translator in different schools.
- J) He, then served as an editor of the first Egyptian newspaper succeeding his late mentor al-'Aṭṭār.
- K) He was able to publish his early translations which he accomplished during his stay in France.
- L) In 1834, his book about his trip to France was published for the first time with great support and appreciation from the viceroy.
- M) In 1835 Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was assigned to start up the school of translation/languages. He was responsible to select the students, the study materials and to teach in the new school.

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2) Shākir (1997) pp. 142–4.

- N) In the 1840s the division of translation in the Egyptian government was added to his responsibilities.
- O) As soon as viceroy Muḥammad ‘Alī passed away and succeeded by his grandson ‘Abbās, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was sent to the capital city of the Sudan to work in the Egyptian school there where he spent 4 years.
- P) During his stay in the Sudan, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī translated his only piece of literature – the novel *Telemaque* – from French into Arabic.
- Q) After ‘Abbās passed away, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was called back to Cairo to resume what he had started years ago and to play different roles in education.
- R) During the years after his return, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī led many projects and played a core role in restoring the educational part of the project of modernizing Egypt which started at the time of Muḥammad ‘Alī who ruled Egypt between 1805 and 1848.

In 1873, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī passed away after a successful life with great achievements in administration and in spreading the awareness among Egyptians of what they need to change in their life to restore the glorious days and leading role in human civilization. He left many books, magazine articles, graduates and projects seeking enlightenment and renaissance through following the steps of the Europeans in general and the French in particular.

### 3. Takhlīṣ al-‘Ibrīz Fi Talkhīṣ Bārīz

It is important to read al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s account of the trip to evaluate the group of statements related to his life before and during his trip to Paris. Luckily, he gave us his account in details through his book: *Takhlīṣ al-‘Ibrīz Fi Talkhīṣ Bārīz* which he wrote most of it during his stay there and completed it shortly after his return to Egypt. After completing the book, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was keen to give it to the viceroy who admired it and ordered to get it printed and distributed on the public schools and to the administrative team. The current research will investigate the first 8 statements with a special focus on the points from d. through h.

As for the points D. and E. there is no doubt that he studied in al-‘Azhar. Still, he did not mention anything related to being teacher at al-‘Azhar. According to the preface, he moved from the study to join the service of the viceroy. After mentioning his study in al-‘Azhar, he states that: “thus, it was easy for me to enter the service of His Excellency, first as a preacher (wa‘īz) in the army and then to be elevated to the rank of envoy to Paris to accompany the Effendis who were sent to study the

sciences and arts present in that magnificent city”<sup>3)</sup>. We cannot find anything to confirm that al-Taḥṭāwī spent some of his early years in teaching at al-'Azhar. Not only that, but it is not clear that he went to France as 'Imām. He served as preacher in the army before traveling but not during his trip to Paris. In Paris, he was an envoy among the other members who travelled to study there. al-Taḥṭāwī also does not mention the name of al-'Aṭṭār as the one who suggested his name for this mission, or even for the work as a preacher in the army. His education in religious science qualified him for both, and he used the passive voice to express how his name was added to the list of the traveling mission: “When my name was entered among those of the travelers, and I made preparations to go, some relatives and well-wishers, especially our Shaykh al-'Aṭṭār - who is passionately fond of listening to wondrous stories and of knowing exceptional works - told me to observe in great detail everything that would take place on this trip, everything I saw and encountered that was strange and wondrous, and to write it down so that it could be useful to discover the face of this region”<sup>4)</sup>

An 'Imām is usually responsible for leading prayers and other liturgical activities, as well as giving theological advices and speeches to the Muslims around him. This work may have special importance when the group of Muslims lives abroad as a minority. They may also have some questions about their daily life or Islamic duties. In this case, they can ask their 'Imām for guidance. Through the centuries, 'Imām was not supposed to have a degree or diploma. He should have some knowledge about his religion. Education was not a prerequisite. If education was needed, then the level depends on where the person takes his responsibility. To become an 'Imām in a remote area in the countryside, a short period of study in a big mosque may be enough. It is, of course, different when it comes to the big mosques in the main cities or when joining the service of a high-ranked personality.

When going through the account of the trip, traces of the role as 'Imām are missing. There is nothing related to liturgical activities by any means. al-Taḥṭāwī did not write about the prayers, the direction to Mecca, the fasting time during Ramadan which is a month of fasting for Muslims. He did not even mention how Muslims can find halal food in France.

If an 'Imām was travelling to accompany students, he would have many things to mention about their life and how they were able to manage between their study and life in a non-Muslim country on one hand and Islam on the other hand. That was not said at all in the text. And that goes opposite

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3) Newman (2011) p.98. All Citations will be referring to the English translation of the book.

It is important to mention that the verb “elevated” is not used in the source book and was added by the translator. A better translation may use the verb “moved” also, the word accompany can be better replaced with the word “among”. The translator was affected by the background about al-Tahtawi as Imam not a student.

4) *Ibid* pp. 98–99.

the redundant nature of the talkative al-Ṭaḥṭāwī.

The book consists of preface, six essays and epilogue. The first two essays were dedicated to give a detailed account of the journey from Cairo to Alexandria and then the sea journey to Marseille to the final destination in Paris, and the fourth one was about the study and exams of the students in France. The three other essays were informative ones about Paris, the revolution and the basic sciences and arts. The reader expects to find in any part something about the duties of the 'Imām, but there is not.

On the contrary, the fourth essay gives a detailed description of the students' life, and specially to the life of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as a student.

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī tells us about the study since the beginning of the journey, using the first person pronoun in plural: *we, us & our*. He introduces the essay stating that it will be "on our perseverance and work in the arts required for the attainment of the goal of our ruler and on the organization of the time devoted to reading writing and other disciplines. It also contains the great expenses on the part of our benefactor, a number of letters between myself and some of the eminent Frankish personalities with regard to learning and a mention of the arts and the books I have studied in the city of Paris".<sup>5)</sup>

In addition to the pronoun referring to the first person in plural, we shall not miss the describing clause "**I have studied**". As it may give a key to a different understanding of the role al-Ṭaḥṭāwī played in the mission.

In describing the daily routine of the students including him, he says: ". As it was the hope of our benefactor that we should learn quickly and then return to our native country, we already started in Marseilles - so before we even arrived in Paris - to learn how to write the [French] alphabet for about 30 days. When we left for Paris, we all stayed together in one house and started reading. Our activities were arranged as follows: in the morning, we would read a history book for two hours. After lunch, we had a class in writing and French conversation. In the afternoon, we had a class in drawing, followed by one on French grammar"<sup>6)</sup>. So, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī himself was sharing the daily routine of the students and he does not separate himself.

Another example of using the first person plural pronoun can be found when he mentioned the stay in some boarding schools where Egyptian students were divided into small groups or sometimes individually and how much money was spent on every one of the students: "However, we were counted among the well-off or even rich, because of our fine clothes, which they

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5) *Ibid* p. 273.

6) *Ibid* p. 274-5.

considered to be strange; our relation to the benefactor; the vast expenses on our education”<sup>7)</sup> it is hard to ignore the phrase **our education** without thinking that he was among the learners and so much money was spent on him for his living and learning. This short text shows that the money paid for al-Taḥṭāwī's study was not from his own pocket but from the Egyptian government as a member of the mission. This can be a correction of statement h.

One could argue that he was making use of his free time as he had no responsibility to fulfill during the study time. But this cannot stand against the fact that al-Taḥṭāwī, like every other student, was supposed to submit a monthly report about his progress in the study.

In the third section of the fourth essay, al-Taḥṭāwī talks about the orders from the viceroy to submit a monthly report written by the student and endorsed by his teacher about the educational progress during the month:

*“Since receiving this missive, we have each month written about everything we read and learned in the course of the month in question. The teachers signed these letters and sent them on to our benefactor. When one of us was neglectful in doing this, Monsieur Jomard wrote a letter to all of us, ordering those who were assiduous in writing these monthly letters to persevere and to rebuking those who were neglectful. This is a copy of a translation of a letter on this subject, which he sent to me and which we quote in its entirety:*

*Paris, 15 June - 25 Muharram,*

*My dear Shaykh Rifā'a,*

*You are no doubt familiar with the order from your benefactor regarding the monthly letters containing the reports on what you have studied. Continue to show perseverance and submit these letters on the 30th day of each month to Monsieur Muḥrḍār Effendi”*<sup>8)</sup>

In this long text we quoted here, comes no doubt that al-Taḥṭāwī was following the same rules like the other students.

Writing monthly reports was not the only thing, taking exams was another sign that al-Taḥṭāwī was there as a student. In Takhlīs al-Ibrīz, al-Taḥṭāwī tells us about the exams which were conducted in 1827, 1828 and 1831 for all the students including himself, and how he did great to deserve a prize from Monsieur Jomard as the supervisor on the Egyptian students. He quoted a letter sent to him from Jomard to congratulate him about his level after the exam of 1828:

*“Paris, 15 March 1828 You have earned the prize for French grammar for the progress you have made in this language and for the result you have obtained at the last public exam. I am*

7) *Ibid* p.275.

8) *Ibid* p.279.



delighted to be able to send you this token of my appreciation of your endeavors. It will undoubtedly instill new courage in you. I will send a report of your exam to your benefactor with comments about your diligence and success. There is no doubt that he, too, will be pleased with the fact that your work has borne fruit and that you deserve his protection, and the great attention he bestows on your education and instruction. Yours sincerely.”<sup>9)</sup>

It becomes clear now that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was a student, but in which field? It is the art of translation. Translation came number 15 in the list of subjects that needed to be studied according to the preface. We learn his field from the following text: “As for the last exam, after which I returned to Egypt, it happened that Monsieur Jomard convened a jury composed of a number of famous people, among them the Muscovite Minister for Education, who presided over the proceedings. The purpose of this gathering was to ascertain the strength of my humble person in the art of translation, which had been my chosen field during my stay in France.”<sup>10)</sup> The final report which was written by Monsieur Chevalier repeated the same piece of information: “he exerted himself with the utmost zeal in translation, which is his chosen trade.”<sup>11)</sup>

In the last letter which can also be considered as a certificate written about al-Ṭaḥṭāwī by his teacher M. Chevalier, we can find an interesting text that can explain many things:

“Mention should also be made of Monsieur Shaykh Rifā‘a’s zeal, which went so far that it made him work for long periods during the night. This even caused a weakening in the left eye, to the extent that he needed to consult a doctor, who forbade him to read at night; however, he did not comply with this instruction for fear it would hamper his progress. And when he saw that in order for his studies to progress faster he required other books than those provided for him by the state, and that he should also have another teacher in addition to his official one, he spent a large part of his stipend on the purchase of books and on a teacher, who stayed with him for most of the year and provided a class for him during study periods that he was not working with me. I thought it my duty upon his departure to give him this report, which truly corresponds to reality, and to add to it my conviction of his merit and friendship”<sup>12)</sup>

This text is quite important to show us that the image of the diligent al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was true, and also it was true that he used his own money to buy more books and hire private tutor for himself. But it was just a part of the fact that he was basically a student and the Egyptian government paid

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9) *Ibid* p. 298.

10) *Ibid* p. 298.

11) *Ibid* p. 302.

12) *Ibid* p. 302.

for his study and teachers. al-Taḥṭāwī just supplemented that with his own money. So, we can see that the points which created the image of al-Taḥṭāwī were extracted from the whole fact and highlighted and at the same time, his official condition was ignored for some reason. This reason needs to be investigated in detail to find out if it was just a mistake or a wish to create a hero, or even to deeply root the seed of acculturation in the Egyptian intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 4. The biographers of al-Taḥṭāwī

We have seen in the previous part of this paper that the statements D. through H. were but pseudo facts about al-Taḥṭāwī and his early career. But how did this happen?

The man did not write his auto-biography. The first thing that was written on his life came shortly after his death by one of the early graduates of the School of Translation which he started in the middle of the 1830s: Al-Sayyid ṣāliḥ Majdī. His book on al-Taḥṭāwī: Ḥilyat al-Zaman fī manāqib khādim al-waṭan was published several times since 1874 onward. Researchers trusted this book as they thought Majdī was his student and he should know about al-Taḥṭāwī. but the great historian who edited Majdī's book stated that Majdī was closer to 'Ali Mubarak than to al-Taḥṭāwī.<sup>13)</sup>

In two pages, Majdī claims that al-Taḥṭāwī was teaching at al-'Azhar before becoming a preacher in the army; he travelled to France as 'Imām and he decided to study in his free time. He also mentions that al-Taḥṭāwī had some difficulties in pronouncing French.<sup>14)</sup>

It is important to say that what Majdī writes cannot be easily trusted because he was just one of the many students of al-Taḥṭāwī, and he did not work with him. Majdī also made two mistakes when mentioning the books of al-Taḥṭāwī: he claimed that the book about his trip to France was called *Khulāsat al-Ibrīz*, while the original name is *Takhlīṣ al-'Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz*. Majdī also added a word to another title when he mentioned *al-Murshid al-Amīn fī tarbiyat al-banāt wa al-Banīn*, while the original title does not include the word *Tarbiyat*.

Majdī's book was published many times between 1874 and 2017. It played a key role in constructing and shaping the image of al-Taḥṭāwī. What he said about the man and his early career became more powerful than what the reader can understand from the original source.

'Ali Mubarak was the second one to leave a short biography of al-Taḥṭāwī in his famous book: *al-Khiṭaṭ al-tawfiqīyah al-jadīdah li-Miṣr al-Qāhirah wa-muduniḥā wa-bilādihā al-qadīmah wa-al-*

13) Majdi. (2017) pp.8–9. It may worth mentioning that Majdi himself puts his own name among the second group of students of the school of Translation, not the first one.

14) See Majdi: *ibid* pp.30–1.

shahīrah. He repeats what Majdī said in brief: and the most important thing is that he claims that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī studied by himself during the journey and then hired a tutor as soon as he arrived in Paris.<sup>15)</sup> Although his text was short and similar to that of Majdī, researchers still use it to support the account Majdī wrote. The importance of Mubārak relies on his chance to meet with al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and work with him. Mubārak studied in Egyptian public schools and traveled to France 2 decades after al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. But they had the chance to work together specially after al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's return from The Sudan. Mubārak was one of the early generations of native Egyptians who received all their education in a modern system established during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He served in many positions in the government under different rulers, including occupiers, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was still an interesting name for the biographers. Jorjī Zaydān repeated the same information about him as he depended on both Majdī and Mubārak. Zaydān tells us that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī spent 8 years of study and then moved to work as a preacher. So he does not say anything about teaching at al-'Azhar. But he claims that the viceroy appointed the young man to be 'Imām for the students during their trip to France. But when the journey started the young man favored the western knowledge "so he focused on studying French with self-motivation willing to acquire the sciences through it or translating them into Arabic and he may then get rid of his job as 'Imām"<sup>16)</sup>. Zaydān kept repeating that the young man did everything by his own wish. One page later, he says that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī obtained certificates for his education. Zaydān also mentions what Majdī said about al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's deficiency in French pronunciation. Although Zaydān says nothing about his sources, we can claim that he was dependent on Majdī as he repeated the mistake of the book title: *Khulāsat al-Ibrīz*. Zaydān was a migrant from Lebanon abandoned his school in Beirut and settled in Egypt to start his business and career as journalist, writer and owner of a big publishing house: *Dār al-Hilāl*. He established *Dār al-Hilāl* in the 1890s and it is still in business until now although it has become state-owned in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Zaydān left a huge number of books, novels, translations and articles in different topics related to Arabic history, culture and literature.

The thread of pseudo information continues through the 20<sup>th</sup> century with more details quoted from the main book of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī about his life and study in France as if what he reports in the book is the fruit of his self-study.

Badawī also presented his biography of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī which serves as a secondary source next the works of Majdī and Mubārak. The importance of Badawī is related to his work with Anwar Louqa in editing and re-publishing *Takhlīṣ al-'Ibrīz Fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz*. But Badawī also follows the same

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15) Mubārak (2001) Part 13. pp. 150-1.

16) Zaydān (1910) vol. 2. p. 32.

line: 'Imām, studied by himself then, adds Badawī, he got the chance to be enrolled among the students because of his travails in study.<sup>17)</sup>

Al-Najjar for example who presented a complete book about al-Taḥṭāwī, he got Majdī, Mubārak, Zaydān and Badawī as sources for the book. He also had long quotes from Takhlīṣ al-'Ibrīz Fi Talkhīṣ Bārīz. He did not change anything although he had read the parts which say clearly that al-Taḥṭāwī was a student. al-Najjar claims that al-Taḥṭāwī was not the only 'Imām but he was the only one who dared to study and benefit from the chance of being in France.<sup>18)</sup>

## 5. Jomard

We have seen before that Takhlīṣ al-'Ibrīz Fi Talkhīṣ Bārīz can support the hypothesis that al-Taḥṭāwī had traveled to France as a student not 'Imām. Another important source which goes in the same line is an article written by Jomard who was supervising the educational progress of the Egyptian students. Jomard is not an ordinary name, he was one of the famous orientalisks specialized in Egypt and he was the chief editor of a great record published about Egypt as a fruit of the French invasion of Egypt: *Description d'Egypte*. The article was published in 1828 when the students – including our guy – were still there. This means it is a source that was contemporary to the real factual time.<sup>19)</sup> According to the article, al-Taḥṭāwī was a student, and the only one specialized in translation. Jomard mentioned the name of al-Taḥṭāwī several times: sometimes in the list of the students and their field of study, some other times as a brilliant student and in a talk about the background of each student and his age when he came to Paris. One interesting thing about this article is it claims the birth of al-Taḥṭāwī was in 1802. This was not repeated in any other source and it has no special meaning. But what can be significant is the special care and focus that Jomard had about al-Taḥṭāwī as an Azhari graduate and a young man with good command of Arabic. For Jomard, al-Taḥṭāwī is very important in opening the way for the French influence on Egypt and Syria.<sup>20)</sup>

Al-Rāfer' is a well-known historian who did not write specially about al-Taḥṭāwī, but his interest was broader. While writing about viceroy Muḥammad 'Alī, al-Rafe'I gives an account of the educational missions sent abroad. He quoted Jomard about the first mission to France, listing the names and specialties of the students. Strange enough, when he mentioned the name al-Taḥṭāwī, he

17) Badawī. (1959) pp.21–5.

18) al-Najjar. See specifically the chapter about Azhari in Paris. pp.68–83.

19) Jomard: (1828). Vol.2 pp.96–116.

20) See what Jomard wrote about al-Taḥṭāwī: *ibid.* pp.98; 104; 108; 112.

did not write that he was studying translation. He wrote about him that he was the 'Imām. He could not resist the authority of the pseudo information.<sup>21)</sup>

'Umar Ṭusun was able to read and even translate Jomard's article and to mention the fact that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was studying officially in the field of translation. Even though, he was not able to discard the possibility of being 'Imām at the same time.<sup>22)</sup> Ṭusun carries a different voice as he was a member of the Royal family and he had good command of French and was able to have direct access to the official documents because of his royal title.

It is clear now that there is an image of student as stated by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī himself, by Jomard and supported by Tusun versus the inherent image of the 'Imām that came from Majdī, Mubārak, Zaydān and Badawī. Many writers followed the latter Image as they were in a hurry to go through the details.<sup>23)</sup> They have even analyzed the self-motivation of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and his willingness to absorb the modern knowledge as good sign to get rid of the mediaeval traditional culture and to support his people to find their way to enlightenment and modern science.

On the other hand, there came a few people who had carefully read the books and articles like al-Shayyāl, 'imāra and Newman, even though they got trapped. They were not able to state clearly the condition of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī during his stay in France. Al-Shayyāl in his book about al-Ṭaḥṭāwī says in one location that he was elected by al-'Aṭṭār to be 'Imām for the students, and then, after 6 pages only, goes to claim: "Rifā'a was sent to France to be 'Imām for the mission, but it seems that last minute orders came to allow him to study. If he did good then he should go on to master translation"<sup>24)</sup>. Actually, this quotation is a mere conclusion without any citation or reference.

Muḥammad 'imāra edited and republished the complete works of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. He depended through his introduction of the first volume on the same names like everyone else and relied more

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21) Al-Rāfe'ī (2017) p. 411.

22) Tusun (1934) The translation of Jomard's article came in the pages between 13–34. The effort Tusun excreted was remarkable as he was able to correct names in the original article and collect detailed information about the monthly salary of each student and the progress of each of them later after return. So, on page 46 he writes about al-Taḥṭawī: "he was the Imam and then was chosen to learn Translation. His monthly Salary was 250 piasters. He left France at the late of 1831. He established the School of Languages and headed it and he had many books and translations. He was one of the pillars of the Arab Scientific renaissance, or better to say its leader in Egypt. He passed away in 1873 and had held the honorable title of Bey."

23) See for example:  
Tajir (2013) p. 53.  
Badr (1963) pp. 53–4.  
Crabbs (1986) pp. 69–70.  
al-Fakhūry (1986) pp. 70–71.  
Hāmid (1990) pp. 25–6  
Choueiri (2003) p. 19.  
Al-Sakkūt (2007) pp. 215–6.  
Hourani (2013) p. 69.

24) al-Shayyāl (2020) pp. 12, 18. This quotation was repeated as it is without any change in al-Shayyāl (1951) p. 123.

on Majdī. He goes to say that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was 'Imām,<sup>25)</sup> and after few pages states that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī decided to become a student plus his role as 'Imām.<sup>26)</sup> He did not refer to any source or cite any book or article.

Maḥmūd Fahmī Ḥijāzī, on his turn, republished *Takhlīṣ al-ʿIbrīz Fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz* in 1974. He preceded the book with a long study and gave it a title of his own and published it separately later. It was just one year after the first volume edited and introduced by 'Imāra. In his introduction, Ḥijāzī presented a biography for al-Ṭaḥṭāwī to his reader from page 5 to 25. On his account about al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's trip to Paris, Ḥijāzī states that being cautious of life in France, it became necessary in protection to the members and their behavior to attach to the mission a preacher and 'Imām to supervise the members in addition to other administrative supervisors. As soon as the idea came to discussion, al-ʿAṭṭār nominated his favorite al-Ṭaḥṭāwī to the post.<sup>27)</sup> So, for Ḥijāzī, the responsibility assigned to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was a mere supervision. Study was not his task, but he volunteered to do it. Not just that, but al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, according to Ḥijāzī, was the main person and was supported by two others. This does not agree at all with what was mentioned by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī from the introduction. Ḥijāzī concludes his account about the supervising position as a sign of how the viceroy was seeking the fruits of the French science and, at the same time, keeping the religious nature of the country and the mission members.<sup>28)</sup> Surprisingly enough, Ḥijāzī mentions Jomard and his article about the mission in the footnote number 89 of his footnotes on the introduction of *Takhlīṣ al-ʿIbrīz* without paying any attention to its content about the role of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as a student, not an 'Imām.<sup>29)</sup> We may think that he did not read it at all as he did not notice that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was not mentioned among the leaders of the mission.

Daniel Newman translated *Takhlīṣ al-ʿIbrīz Fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz* from Arabic into English, and wrote a long introduction to it which can be considered a complete study.<sup>30)</sup> The study and its writer got trapped between the two possible images of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. We can clarify that by mentioning his usage of three words or expressions: 'Imām, *study stay* and *Paris stay*. Newman used the word 'Imām 8 times including on in the title and another one for the copyright page. 4 others when referring to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. The Most important two times were when he used the word to describe the role of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī during the 5 years abroad: "when, two years later, it was decided to send a student

25) 'Imāra (1973–80) p. 32.

26) *Ibid.* pp. 38–40.

27) Ḥijāzī (1974) p. 13.

28) *Ibid.* p. 14.

29) *Ibid.* pp. 164; 429.

30) Newman, Daniel L. (2011) *An Imam in Paris- Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826–1831)*. London. Saqi.

contingent to France, al-‘Aṭṭār quite naturally thought this would be a great opportunity for his former pupil and had him appointed ‘Imām to provide the group with religious guidance during their stay in the heathen Europe”<sup>31)</sup>. Four pages later says Newman: “It was thanks to the favour al-‘Aṭṭār enjoyed with Muḥammad ‘Alī that he was able to have his favourite disciple, Rifā‘a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī - one of the few native Egyptians - appointed to the student mission, albeit primarily as ‘Imām.”<sup>32)</sup> But actually we find the expression *the few native Egyptians* not true. The native Egyptians were almost half the population of the mission. Actually, it was a policy for Muḥammad ‘Alī to give equal distribution in many matters specially when it is not yet clear who can accomplish the task successfully.

Although the image of ‘Imām was foregrounded, Newman used the expression **study stay** to describe the time of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in Paris. And in some cases he used **Paris stay** or **Paris days** for the same thing. It seems he was not sure about the way he can go. This led to talking about him among students after stating that he was only ‘Imām.

## 6. More shreds of evidence.

There are many points that cause confusion and give floor to different interpretations and assumptions concerning the mission to study in France starting from 1826. The reason for all of this is related to inability to read the original formal documents related to the formation of the mission. We can’t be sure if such document is still available in the national Egyptian archive or not.

It was said that the mission had group of students, but their number was not clearly stated: some scholars said they were 18 while others claimed they were 34. According to Jomard, the exact number was 44. 42 of them travelled in the beginning and 2 were dispatched later. Five of them were sent back after about 2 or three years for low performance or misconduct issues. When we go through the names we can easily understand that they were not all Muslims; 5 of them had the title sheikh. Of course, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was one of them. This title was the reason behind the misunderstanding that made many historians and scholars believe that there was more than one ‘Imām and they did not care to study, and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was the only one who did upon his own will. 5 out of 44 to be ‘Imāms?! It can’t be. Two out of the five were sent back in 1827. 2 more, including al-Ṭaḥṭāwī went back in 1831, while the last one returned to Egypt in 1832. They had all returned before some other students. If the Egyptian government was quite concerned about the liturgical part then why would it allow the early return of all the ‘Imāms before the students? One of the other members

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31) Newman. (2011) p.34.

32) *Ibid* 38.

holding the title sheikh was Aḥmad al-‘Aṭṭar. He was about 4 years older than al-Taḥṭāwī, and according to Jomard and Tusun, he was studying mechanics. The third one was named Muḥammad al-Dashtouty and he was about 18 years old when they traveled. He studied medicine and anatomy<sup>33)</sup>.

So we can't believe that there was many members for the task of 'Imām. It would have been a waste of money to send all those people to guide less than 40 others. According to al-Taḥṭāwī, students spent less than one year together and then were divided into small groups or even as individuals and sent to separate boarding schools. They were not permitted to leave their boarding schools except for Thursdays after classes or Sundays.<sup>34)</sup> This means they were not able even to pray the Friday group prayer as a group for more than 4 years. If we also add to that the fact that there were students sent out of Paris then we realize that they did not have the possibility to contact the 'Imām /s

It is important to remember that the mission did not have any administrative member among the group of travelers. Mission leaders were 3 but all of them were also students: “These three honorable men also follow classes like the rest of the group; the esteemed Keeper of the Seal concentrated on the science of civil administration, the esteemed Master of Records on military organization and the esteemed Ḥājj Ḥasan Effendi on the science of navigation and marine engineering. All three display the utmost zeal and the greatest desire for the acquisition of knowledge - even though this is commonly scorned by the powers that be.”<sup>35)</sup> if there was nobody assigned to manage the group then how come we can think that there would be 1, 3 or 5 assigned to be devoted to the job of 'Imām?!

Few years later Muḥammad 'Alī wrote a letter to blame a deputy of the army for buying 80 pieces of hats for the 10 female pupils studying to become midwives.<sup>36)</sup> The person who pays attention to such a detail would never send 'Imām who does but leading very few prayers most of the year.

## 7. Conclusion.

For decades after decades, most of the scholars and the public used to refer to al-Taḥṭāwī as an 'Imām, which means his responsibility while being in France was to lead prayers and give religious

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33) Jomard (1828). pp. 110–1, & Tusun (1934) pp. 35–45.

34) Newman (2011) pp. 274–276.

35) *Ibid*: 128.

36) Ḥāmid (2010) p. 439.



support to the Muslims in the Egyptian mission. He had not been assigned to study according to this understanding. This paper came to challenge it as a result of reading the Main account of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī during his stay in France.

As we have seen, full time 'Imām is not possible then. Still, maybe al-Ṭaḥṭāwī could be assigned to act as 'Imām plus his main responsibility as a student. But we can't find any shred of evidence to support this in his writings. So, where did this title come from?

There is a possibility that when the viceroy decided to send this big mission to France, which invaded Egypt less than three decades before and which is not a Muslim country, he wanted to address the public opinion with something they would accept. If there would be an 'Imām in the group they could have less fear about the students. Another possibility is that when historians and scholars read the names preceded with the title *Sheikh* they thought it is for an 'Imām not a student. But this title is commonly used in Egypt to talk about someone who studied in al-'Azhar or who has some knowledge about Islam. A third possibility can be for Majdī when he wrote about al-Ṭaḥṭāwī he wanted to give him more credit by saying that he was 'Imām.

This title as 'Imām gave al-Ṭaḥṭāwī a legendary image as it was not his task to study but he did and made him more successful in addressing the public with the new ideas and values imported from a different culture. This image encouraged many scholars to go forward and add details over details interpreting his readiness for modernization. This legendary image can be studied using folk narratives and, of course, postcolonial approaches.

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